

Truancy Court gets job done

We're sitting in on Truancy Court, new this year, at Hugh Bain Middle School in Cranston. The buzz among guidance counselors, DCYF workers and a court assistant

JULIA STEINY



always stops completely during any business between Family Court Judge Angela Paulhus and the truant and his or her parent(s).

"Where's your mom?"

A surly eighth grader mumbles, "I don't know."

Judge Paulhus is grim. In my almost four hours in the court, this is the only parent no-show. "Did she know she had court?"

"Yeah," comes the prompt, almost chipper reply.

"Why isn't she here?"

"... I don't know," says the child unconvincingly.

"Then we'll continue this matter for a week. Tell Mom that if she doesn't come, I'll issue an arrest warrant." The child nods and schlumps out without expression.

Paulhus packs up that file, pursuing her lips, "Mom is a huge issue, and there are at least three other kids involved." Someone asks if she'd like to talk to DCYF? She thinks. Sighs. "No, not yet. Let's see what happens." Some families respond quickly, gratefully, to the court's attentions; this one's going to be tough.

If you were not already bummed by the state of America's children today, sit and observe the river of modern problems as they come through the Truancy Court's door. Some of the stories — the drugs, the alcohol, the rape by an older family member, the various mothers' boyfriends who basically want the kid out of his hair — some of the stories were tough to hear. But the incredibly good news is that the problems are getting handled.

Maybe not completely or even adequately, but these courts are throwing major lifelines into troubled children's lives when there might still be a chance to pull them back from the brink.

Big Ugly Fact: the number-one indicator of future delinquency, dropping out of school and teen pregnancy is truancy.

The regular Family Court calendar takes forever to hear a truant case.

In 1999, Rhode Island's Family Court Chief Justice Jeremiah S. Jeremiah, Jr. — along with Harry Potter, the principal at Hope High — traveled to Philadelphia to see a school-based truancy court and quickly established one at Hope High. Now Rhode Island has 18 such courts, some of which handle several schools, holding hearings mainly in middle schools across the state.

If you have seen *Judging Amy*, a family court TV series, the real thing was not dissimilar except there are no lawyers, just parents and their children. Like the TV judge, Judge Paulhus is generally kind, friendly and understanding to kids and parents alike, but quite capable of getting major tone in her voice or even removing a child from the home.

During a break, she says, "Mainly we see seventh, eighth and ninth graders. Sometimes we see older high school students, but we're finding that that's too late. Not that we're not making progress, but we can't establish work ethic or better habits.

"The truant officer makes the initial call as to who goes to Truancy Court. Some cities are extremely busy, so a kid may be out between 30 and 70 days before we see him. At the first meeting, we're usually able to get more information than the school does as to why they're truant. We'll discover, for example, the parents have depression issues or need conflict-mediation, so we get them into counseling right away."

Literally on the other side of the court's wall is a phone that the guidance counselors, who come with the kids, can use to make appointments then and there, while the parents are in tow.

Cranston's head of guidance, Joseph Herbolt, sits with a laptop and a printer, downloading anything that might be of assistance. He's thrilled with the program. "I'm here to tie up any loose ends, to see if I can see any patterns..." Some courts don't have assistance from guidance counselors though, because of union issues.

The drill for a new truant starts with the judge saying: "According to Rhode Island law, if a child under 16 misses a day unexcused, the fine to his or her parents is \$50; after 30 days of unexcused absences, it's \$500 or go to the ACI [prison]. Today the petition is filed against you; your parents are not in trouble yet. So, you have two options: "Option One: If you feel the days you missed school were missed for a very good reason, you can choose trial. A lawyer will be appointed and if your lawyer can prove you missed school for a good reason, the petition is dismissed. But if they decided there was not a good reason, and the judge decides against you, you can go to the Training School.

"Option Two: Stay in Truancy Court. I'll see you every week and you will obey four rules: 1.) Attend school every day. 2.) On time. 3.) Do your work and 4.) Behave and do not get suspended. If you do what you're supposed to do, at the end of the year, the petition is dismissed. If not, we can remand you to counseling, community service or residential care."

They all took Option Two. Whenever a child's records revealed good attendance, regularly completed work and improving grades, everyone in the room applauded. It was sweet.

Twice a parent was confronted with either immediately going up to Family Court — with its much more serious consequences — or having DCYF take the child. One mother took her son to Jeremiah's court, and

another — for good reason in my opinion — waved her hand in despair and said to go ahead and take her child.

Paulhus says, "The wonderful thing is that since we see the child on a weekly basis, we can track the problem and monitor the progress. Previously, cases would wait a long time and the child would be adjudicated and carried for six months. Here everyone is focused on solving the problem for the child. It's a team effort. Attendance is increasing overall because of the Truancy Court. Parents often say they wish they'd had Truancy Court when they were young and truant. A lot of the parents don't know the extent of the problem, and some schools are better than others at informing them. Parents often say that this is what they wanted all along. They feel isolated with the problems."

I'll bet.

This is a truly terrific collaboration between the court, the schools and the local service providers. These people are saving kids. Good work!

Julia Steiny is a former member of the Providence School Board; she now consults and writes for a number of education, government and private enterprises. She welcomes your questions and comments on education. She can be reached by e-mail at juliasteiny@cox.net or c/o EdWatch, Education and Employment, Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, R.I. 02902.